

# Från idé till politisk verklighet. Föräldrapolitiken i Sverige och Danmark

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## Abstract

THE EMPIRICAL AIM of this thesis is to explain why Sweden and Denmark since 1974 has been pursuing divergent parental leave politics. When Sweden in 1974 replaced its maternity leave with a gender neutral parental leave it became the first country in the world to include fathers in this type of institution. In the thesis this change is seen as an example of institutional change, or a path break. On the contrary, path dependency has been prevailing in Denmark with refusals of proposals to include fathers in the existing maternity leave. Therefore, the thesis also aims to answer the question why a path break became a reality in Sweden but not in Denmark. Lately in historic institutionalism ideas have been identified as a necessary, but not sufficient, factor for the ability to explain institutional change and for understanding path dependency. In the light of this, the theoretical aim of the thesis is to contribute with knowledge about the role of ideas in institutional development.

The thesis shows that the key explanation for both the diverging political outcome and for the understanding of how ideas can contribute to institutional change lies in the interaction of several factors in which ideas and actors are directly relevant to institutional change, while power resources and institutions rather is of indirect importance. The concept of (re)interpretation is introduced in the thesis. Institutional change is made possible through active idea-carriers (re) interpreting an idea in a way that makes it acceptable for a sufficient majority. The ability to make a successful (re)interpretation is in turn

dependent of which actors embracing the idea and the power resources of these actors given their institutional positions. The institutional arrangements together with powerful passive idea carriers made it possible for Swedish active idea carriers to (re)interpret the new idea of what is negative with traditional gender roles into a question of gender neutrality. A (re) interpretation which demolished the already institutionalised idea about female specificity and which created political consensus. Danish active carriers of the idea of what is negative with traditional gender roles were incapable of creating such a (re)interpretation. Instead the principle guiding the Danish active idea carriers was that the insurance first and foremost should protect women.

The fact that the two countries are still pursuing divergent politics depends largely on the strength of these institutionalised ideas: gender neutrality which since 1974 has been guiding Swedish politics and female specificity which since the early 1900s has been guiding in Denmark. Consequently both the Swedish and Danish development is characterized by path dependence and accordingly the thesis confirms previous research that points out the power of institutionalised ideas.

In contrast to earlier claims the thesis also demonstrates that Swedish women were the driving force behind the parental leave. However, the women did not have the power resources to create change on their own. They had to rely on the most powerful actors — men.

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*Key words:* Nordic welfare policy, parental leave, family policy, ideational analysis, historical institutionalism, gender role, institutional change, Sweden, Denmark.